

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Explosion at the West Fertilizer Company Plant at Baylor University in Waco, Texas

April 25, 2013

Please. Thank you, Senator Cornyn, Governor Perry, President Starr, gathered dignitaries, the community of Baylor and Waco, most of all, the family and the friends and neighbors of West, Texas.

I cannot match the power of the voices you just heard on that video. And no words adequately describe the courage that was displayed on that deadly night. What I can do is offer the love and support and prayers of the Nation.

The Book of Psalms tells us: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us. We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance." We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

For this State, for our country, these have been trying and difficult days. We gather here in Texas to mourn brave men who went through fire and all those who have been taken from us. We remain mindful of our fellow Americans in flooded States to the north who endure the high waters. We pray for those in Boston who have been tested and the wounded whose greatest tests still lie ahead.

But know this: While the eyes of the world may have been fixed on places far away, our hearts have also been here, in your time of tribulation. And even amidst such sorrow and so much pain, we recognize God's abundance. We give thanks for the courage and the compassion and the incredible grace of the people of West.

We're grateful for Mayor Muska and Mayor Duncan and all those who have shown such leadership during this tragedy. And to the families and neighbors grappling with unbearable loss, we are here to say, you are not alone, you are not forgotten. We may not all live here in Texas, but we're neighbors too. We're Americans too, and we stand with you, and we do not forget. And we'll be there even after the cameras leave and after the attention turns elsewhere. Your country will remain ever ready to help you recover and rebuild and reclaim your community.

Now, until last week, I think it's fair to say that few outside this State had ever heard of West. And I suspect that's the way most people in West like it. *[Laughter]* Now, it is true that weary travelers—and now the wider world—know they can rely on the Czech Stop for a brief respite in the middle of a long stretch of highway. I want to say, by the way, all the Presidents—former Presidents in Dallas send their thoughts and prayers, and George W. and Laura Bush spoke longingly about the kolaches—*[laughter]*—and the even better company, as they've driven through West. And what they understood, and what all of you understand, is what makes West special is not the attention coming from far-flung places. What makes West special, what puts it on the map is what makes it familiar: the people who live there, neighbors you can count on, places that haven't changed, things that are solid and true and lasting.

Most of the people in West know everybody in West. Many of you are probably descended from some of those first settlers: hardy immigrants who crossed an ocean and kept on going. So for you, there's no such thing as a stranger. When someone is in need, you reach out to them, and you support them; you do what it takes to help them carry on.

That's what happened last Wednesday, when a fire alarm sounded across a quiet Texas evening. As we've heard, the call went out to volunteers—not professionals—people who just love to serve. People who want to help their neighbors. A call went out to farmers and car salesmen and welders and funeral home directors, the city secretary, and the mayor. It went out to folks who are tough enough and selfless enough to put in a full day's work and then be ready for more.

And together, you answered the call. You dropped your schoolwork, left your families, jumped in firetrucks and rushed to the flames. And when you got to the scene, you forgot fear, and you fought that blaze as hard as you could, knowing the danger, buying time so others could escape. And then, about 20 minutes after the first alarm, the Earth shook, and the sky went dark, and West changed forever.

Today our prayers are with the families of all who we've lost: the proud sons and daughters of West whose memories will live on in our hearts, parents who loved their kids, and leaders who served their communities. They were young and old, from different backgrounds and different walks of life. A few were just going about their business. But an awful lot ran towards the scene of disaster trying to help. One was described as the kind of guy whose phone was always ringing with folks in need of help, help he always provided. That's just who these folks were.

Our thoughts are with those who face a long road: the wounded, the heartbroken, families who lost their homes and possessions in an instant. They're going to need their friends in West, but they're also going to need their friends in Texas and their friends all across this country. They'll still need you to answer that call. They will still need those things that are lasting and true. For as Scripture teaches us, "a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

To the people of West, just as we've seen the love you share in better times, as friends and brothers and sisters, these hard days have shown your ability to stand tall in times of unimaginable adversity.

You saw it in leaders like Mayor Muska, who lost close friends. And you saw it in the hospital staff who spent the night treating people that they knew, toiling through their tears as they did what had to be done. We saw it in the folks who helped evacuate an entire nursing home, including one man who drove an elderly resident to safety and then came back to do it again, twice. We saw it in the people so generous that when the Red Cross set up a shelter for folks who couldn't go back to their homes, not that many people showed up, because most had already been offered a place to stay with their friends and family and neighbors.

Complete strangers drove from hundreds of miles to donate supplies. Firefighters from surrounding communities manned the stations so surviving volunteers could recover from their wounds. Right here at Baylor, students stood in line for hours to give blood. And a nearby school district opened its doors to the students who can't go back to their classrooms, putting welcome signs on lockers and in the hallways.

So that's the thing about this tragedy. This small town's family is bigger now. It extends beyond the boundaries of West. And in the days ahead, this love and support will be more important than ever, because there will be moments of doubt and pain and the temptation to wonder how this community will ever fully recover. Families who have lost such remarkable men of the sort that we saw in that video, there are going to be times where they simply don't understand how this could have happened.

But today I see in the people of West, in your eyes, that what makes West special isn't going to go away. And instead of changing who you are, this tragedy has simply revealed who you've always been.

It's the courage of Deborah Sulak, who works as a cashier just around the corner from the fire station. She said: "It's going to be tough for the families. But we're going to rebound because we're fighters." And that courage will bring West back.

It's the love of Carla Ruiz, who used to live in West, but now lives in Austin. And last week, she drove all the way back. "I had to be here," she said. "You have to be here for family." That love will keep West going.

It's the faith of someone like Pastor John Crowder that will sustain the good people of West for as long as it takes. His church was damaged in the explosion. So on Sunday, the congregation assembled outside. "What happened Wednesday was awful," he told them, "but God is bigger than all of this." God is bigger than all of this, and He is here with you in West. He is bigger than all of this, and He is here with you.

Going forward, it's not just your town that needs your courage and your love and your faith. America does too. We need towns where if you don't know what your kids are up to, then chances are your neighbors do too, and they'll tell on those kids in a second. *[Laughter]* America needs towns that holds fundraisers to help folks pay the medical bills and then take the time to drop off a home-cooked meal, because they know a family is under stress. America needs communities where there's always somebody to call if your car gets stuck or your house gets flooded. We need people who so love their neighbors as themselves that they're willing to lay down their lives for them.

America needs towns like West. That's what makes this country great, is towns like West. "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us. We went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance."

You have been tested, West. You have been tried. You have gone through fire. But you are and always will be surrounded by an abundance of love. You saw it in the voices on those videos. You see it in the firefighters and first responders who are here. All across America, people are praying for you and thinking of you. And when they see the faces of those families, they understand that these are not strangers, these are neighbors. And that's why we know that we will get through this.

God bless West. May God grant His peace on those that we've lost, His comfort on their families. May He continue to bless this great State of Texas, and may He continue to bless these United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:54 p.m. in the Ferrell Center. In his remarks, he referred to Kenneth W. Starr, president, Baylor University; Mayor Tommy Muska of West, TX; Mayor Malcolm Duncan, Jr., of Waco, TX; Joseph F. Pustejovsky, city secretary, West, TX, who was killed during the West Fertilizer Co. explosion on April 17; and John Crowder, pastor, First Baptist Church in West, TX.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : West Fertilizer Company plant, explosion in West, TX, memorial service at Baylor University, Waco, TX.

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